

NANCY CHUNN, Concord Gallery:

Nancy Chunn rarely paints a likable picture, but she produces many that command a respect much more impressive than likability. At their best, Chunn's paintings work through a system of contradiction to attain a balance of discomfort. Unassuming of aspect, they are almost domineering in scale. The dry, thin appearance of their surfaces is belied by the exactness with which colors are worked. On direct inspection they appear to tell us something easy, unambiguous, but a closer, longer look disabuses us of this illusion, and we are left with a much more complex statement, one refusing simple categorization.

One of the best paintings in this show, *El Salvador*, 1984, is typical in this regard. Two images, a strange, irregular shape and a tool of some kind, are juxtaposed on a dark, near-invisible ground. But to describe the painting thus is to say very little about it. The ground, for example, is dark, but not empty. It is an elaborately worked surface, something like a tweed in the density of its color and texture, and it speaks eloquently to the

ongoing discourse in Modernist painting as to the significance of field and process. Similarly the thin, dry pigment that marks the images is to be understood in terms of economy and elegance rather than as a sign of superficiality. (The current vogue for "fat" paint, often the easiest way to manipulate pigment, too often blinds us to other choices.) What are the images? One is clear, a dark and heavy mallet bearing down hard on the other, which is liverish in color and shape. The title *El Salvador*, of course, provides the essential clue: this odd, nondescript form is a map of that suffering country. What Chunn does, with a visceral directness that is painful, is remind us of the vulnerability of identity within a system of signs to the arbitrary buffets and bruises of those who wield power. The means by which a Salvadoran might recognize and identify his or her country (the map being but one of many) are a mystery to most of us up here in the United States, are as hidden and as vulnerable as our own vital signs.

—THOMAS LAWSON